

Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss: The Women Behind "Before Stonewall"

By Cathy Cockrell

Filmmaker Greta Schiller is scheduled to fly out of New York on Sunday to visit five U.S. cities with a print of a historic gay film. She sandwiches my Saturday afternoon interview between last-minute errands, leafletting for gay voter registration, and a meeting with a visiting photographer. Schiller and Andrea Weiss, the film's archival research director, arrive carrying leaflets, a print of their movie and a small mountain of parcels.

"I feel like a bag lady," says Weiss, a thin, dark-haired woman in sweatpants, by way of introduction. Schiller, not your visual stereotype of a New York woman director, wears a pink hooded sweatshirt, high-top tennis shoes, and glasses with small speckles of paint on the lenses.

The film that Schiller and Weiss bring with them, and that they have begun to show to lesbian and gay audiences in benefit screenings, is the illuminating, funny, and moving documentary *Before Stonewall*. The first feature film on the history of the gay American subculture, it uses newsreel footage, home movies, interviews, old photographs, and narration to follow "the making of a lesbian and gay community," as the subtitle puts it, through seven decades of American life.

One has only to imagine how many gay people searched their attics for the snapshots, home movies, and documents used in the film, or to read the credits at its end, to know that *Before Stonewall* is a film quite literally "made" by the lesbian and gay community. In another sense, at its heart, are Greta Schiller, Andrea Weiss, and three gay males (the editor, co-director and executive producer) who lived with the project for three years. Schiller, as director, bore "the final responsibility for what you like and dislike about the picture," as she puts it with charac-



Greta Schiller

teristic bluntness. Weiss, who considers herself first and foremost a writer, penned the funding proposals, co-authored the script (with Schiller), and directed the extensive archival research.

The idea for the film started three years ago, according to Schiller, when she was approached about working on a movie about the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. "It was to be a half hour," she says. "But as we started talking to other people and reading more books we realized it should be, rather, [a film chronicling] the development of the homosexual subculture into an above-ground community. The evolution was much larger than just the gay rights movement." Soon the project was much larger, too: a 90 minute film with a \$250,000 budget.

Schiller, who was 26 at the time, already had some valuable film credits under her belt. They included *Greetings from Washington*, a documentary on the first national march on Washington for gay rights, which she co-produced, and a narrative film called *Greta's Girls* that was cited as best student film in her undergraduate film program.

Schiller had come to New York seven years before from her native

state of Michigan. One of four girls raised by a single parent, she credits her mother for her confidence and independence. "To be a secretary and support four kids is not an easy feat. That was a pretty strong image for me," Schiller remembers. "Mom was a woman with radical ideas. She used to drag me to CORE picket lines on integration when I was six or seven, and tell stories about the injustices of segregation when she was growing up in the '40s in Detroit."

These political convictions were part of why she accepted her homosexuality, Schiller believes. "I encountered no resistance to my being gay from my family. A little confusion, maybe, but no resistance." As for discovering her sexuality, "it wasn't a matter of coming out," she insists. "I had a girlfriend in high school. It was what I always was. It was a natural phenomenon." Schiller's sense of self comes through in her account of telling her father that she was gay. "I was visiting him with my girlfriend. I asked him did he have a girlfriend? He said 'Oh, . . . I always have a girlfriend.' I said, 'So do I.' That's the only thing that was said. From then on my girlfriends were always welcome in his house."

In junior high school Greta helped found an underground newspaper that eventually became a national high school news service. Ann Arbor at the time, was a center of political ferment, and she started hanging out on the University of Michigan campus, becoming "more and more a radical," she says. "I just stayed with it. I would say I'm a rebel with a cause."

Another passion at the time was more conventional—the movies. The University of Michigan had many film societies on campus. "I used to go to movies four or five nights a week," she remembers. "Every kind of movie. I always loved movies."

Schiller moved to New York in order to attend City College. "I'd always heard it called the Harvard

of the proletariat," she says. "I thought that was wonderful." Not surprisingly, when she got to City College, she enrolled in women's studies and in a film course, and eventually went on scholarship to Picker Film Institute, the school's intensive film workshop. "I went to Picker for two years, I got addicted, and I started making movies," says Schiller.

Before Stonewall traces the emergence of a gay subculture in 20th century America, decade by decade, as a kind of Gay History 101, as Schiller describes it. The film places this history in the context of the larger social history. The extreme isolation of gay people early in the century and the emergence of small havens for lesbians and gay men, parallels the

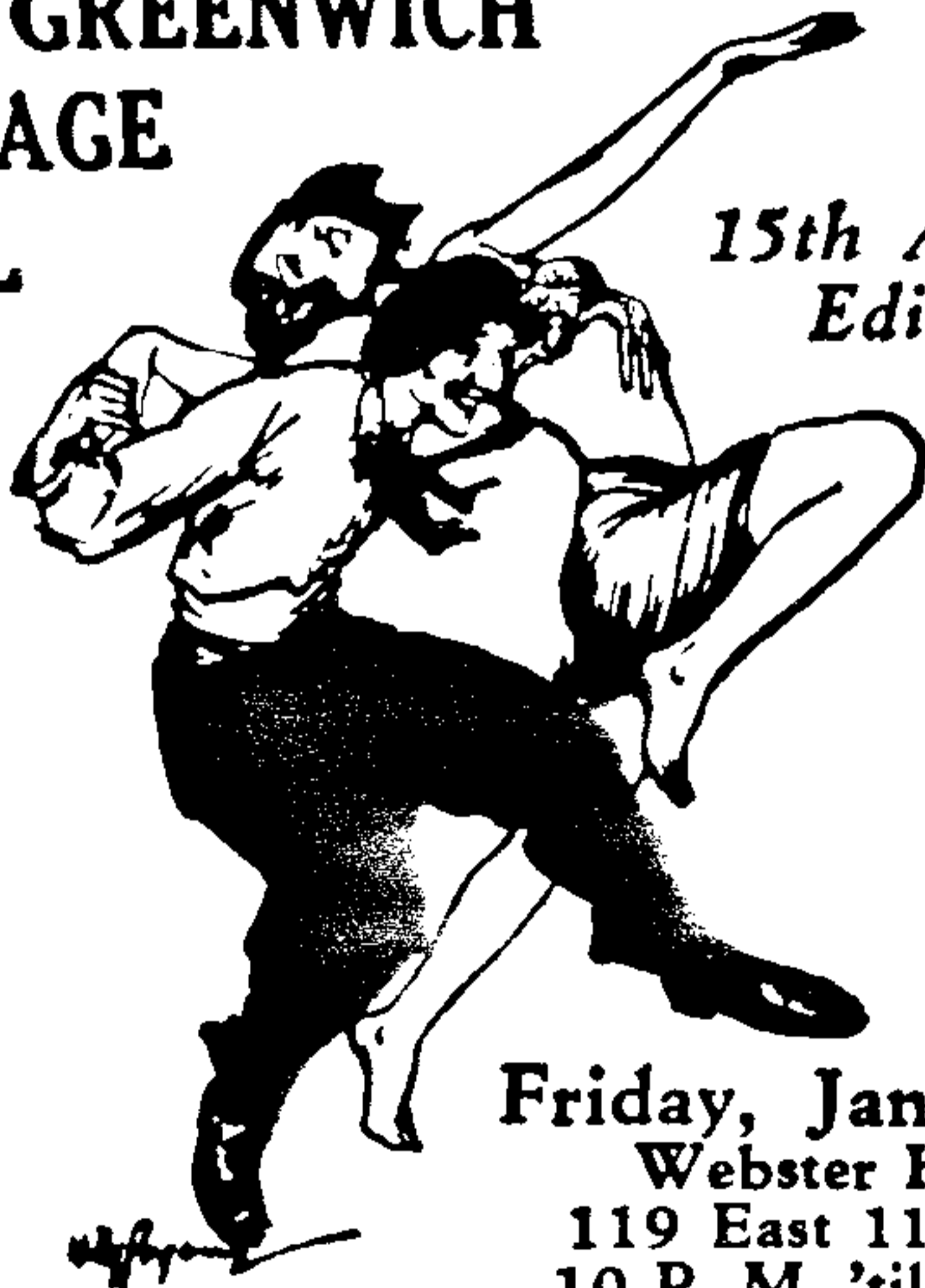
growth of urban America in New Orleans French Quarter, San Francisco's Barbary Coast, and New York's Harlem and Greenwich Village in the '20s. The Depression, the rise of the radical left and right, and the imposition of a motion picture code banning all reference to homosexuals, represents the '30s. World War II saw the sudden convergence in the military of hundreds of formerly-isolated gay people. McCarthyism helped re-double pressure to marry in the '50s. The women's movement, hippie movement, and the black movement, which served as prototypes for all other domestic liberation movements, arose in the '60s. Finally, we witness the rebellion of gays during a routine raid of the Greenwich Village Stonewall/Inn in 1969.

Perhaps the film's strongest segment is the one depicting WWII and its profound impact on the formation of a lesbian and gay subculture. Intriguing interview footage includes a moving account by Johnnie Phelps, a lesbian printer from Los Angeles, about her encounter with General Eisenhower over lesbianism in the Women's Army Corps. The WWII segment also features a number of the brilliant and funny juxtapositions of visual and sound images that distinguish *Before Stonewall*. The narrator of an old newsreel tells us that American soldiers "came from every walk of life, leaving families, friends and sweethearts behind," and we see dance halls full of men that take on new possibilities in the context of the film.

A booming voice from a government PR film lauds the "healthy leisure-time activities" of our boys in uniform over visuals of servicemen loading ammunition into artillery guns.

Before Stonewall is an accessible work that aspires, nonetheless, to be something more than a conventional "talking heads" production. "We have an innovative theme," Schiller says. "No one's done a feature length history of homosexuals on film. But as a filmmaker I really wanted it to be a technically innovative film in addition. We wanted a moving picture that

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moved. And we wanted to do things like using archival materials and reworking them."

To accomplish the archival task, Weiss oversaw some 15 to 18 people around the country who sought to locate photographs and other materials. Then began the gargantuan task of identifying the people in the pictures, and securing their releases. Schiller describes this effort: "We couldn't just put a picture in thinking 'nobody will recognize it, it's from 1959. We'll just put her in our movie, with she and her friends hanging out.' Can you imagine? She could lose her job for that. Something horrible could happen." But when they set out to locate people in the photographs, Weiss recalls, "it was, oh, I think they moved to Maine or they had lost track of each other." "That was the nightmare part of it," according to Schiller. "It was like a Missing Persons Bureau... We ended up putting a lot of sunglasses on people."

Weiss also spent months combing established archives for visual materials a difficult job complicated by gay people's invisibility. Everywhere from the National Archives to Fox Movietone, archivists told her "you're not going to find anything here." She recounts how she found one of the obviously-gay scenes, depicting a 1959 New York City bar raid, that appears in the movie.

"There was no 'gay' category in the archive. I had about 25 categories, and I had exhausted them. Finally I looked under 'police,' thinking there might be something about vice squads. And there it was... The people who run these archives knew they didn't have categories titled 'homosexual,' so they thought they didn't have anything."

Prior to this project, Weiss had been involved primarily in film programming, writing, and research. *Before Stonewall* was her first opportunity to combine those interests with the actual making of a film.

Weiss, who is 28, was raised in Huntington, Long Island by her stepmother and her father, a retired naval commander. It was an

ardently religious Jewish upbringing, and she continues to feel strongly about being Jewish. Weiss credits her stepmother, a staunch ACLU supporter and someone "very concerned with what's going on in the world," for the political concerns that remain her primary orientation.

"I had always been interested in politics and in film," Weiss says of herself, "but not in what was traditionally the political film genre—documentaries that follow a standard format for a passive audience." In 1982, when she was film programmer for the Collective for Living Cinema, the major New York showcase for avant-garde films, she recalls "leaning more toward political film," and trying to include more varied selections, such as more women's films, in the schedule. "Part of it was I really saw things in this country getting bad. I was still interested in avant-garde film, but saw it almost as a luxury," Says Weiss.

Weiss and Schiller locate the significance of *Before Stonewall* first and foremost in the fact that it was made at all, and largely with government funds—including \$130,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Program Fund, and \$55,000 from the New York State Councils on Arts and Humanities. "That's a significant first step toward the recognition that films on gay subjects are worthy of funding," says Schiller. "A lot of the excuse used by prospective funders in the past was 'you don't have enough experience; it's not a large enough general audience.' It's bullshit to say a film on gay history is not of interest to the general public. I think it is. And I think *Before Stonewall* will prove it." The film is slated for broadcast by PBS to 276 local TV stations in May of 1985, and for theatrical openings around the country late this year.

It's important, too, that *Before Stonewall* was made by gay people themselves. As Schiller puts it, "Something we learned from the black liberation movement is that when you rediscover your history and define it yourself, you've gained strength; you can move forward. Especially Americans, who

have an incredibly short memory. The whole purpose of *Before Stonewall*, is to show the emergence and development of the self-definition of gay people. And that's what the film is, too. The film parallels that. It's not separate."

Male domination of the filmmaking field, and men's role in establishing what is taken as its standards, were felt "even within our own production," according to Schiller. She recalls being criticized

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for hiring a highly skilled camera woman that one of the men on the project considered too short to get the right angle, and for using Rita Mae Brown as narrator, because a narrator supposedly should have a deep voice.

To its credit, *Before Stonewall* goes to some effort to articulate differences in the way people, according to their race, class, or sex, experienced being gay. It took struggle, and in some cases compromise between lesbians and gay men working on the film to arrive at this. Men on the production lobbied for inclusion of points significant to gay male experience—for example, male physique magazines that they felt played an important role historically in helping gay men recognize each other and their own sexuality.

"It was something I wouldn't have known or cared about and wasn't too interested in," Schiller says. "But since they were really pressuring me—Greta, you can't leave that out, you've got to mention the physique magazines—I was convinced that yes, I've got to recognize this phenomenon, the fact of these magazines existing." The final version of the film shows copies of physique magazines as the narration mentions a civil rights breakthrough allowing gay publications to use the U.S. mails. "That little image and that line of narration was really an important point that I had to struggle through with my co-director. I had to make it representative of a gay male thing."

It was a struggle, likewise, to establish a distinct lesbian perspective—to show, for instance, how gay women in the '50s dealt not only with survival as gay people, but with being underpaid, if they worked, and with economic survival.

"I think the men on the film thought it important to include a good number of women in the interviews—but women who were not telling stories that were different from those of gay men," Weiss says. "They just wanted to show that we were all gay."

At one point in the production process, Schiller radically restructured and re-edited the film in order to give it a stronger feminist perspective. "Because it was ultimately my final responsibility, at some point in a debate it was like; 'OK, boys, the discussion's over, this is what we're doing.'" Often she relied on women who were part-time employees on the film, or women outside the production like Barbara Grier of Naiad Press, for emotional support.

One of the criticisms raised by older gay people who have seen *Before Stonewall* is that 'the life' was more sordid and miserable, and more entwined with drugs and alcohol, than they saw depicted in the film. Schiller and Weiss count that version as one of the many stories that went untold. There are others, and you get a sense that they wish they could tell them all. "You could do a whole film on lesbians in the military," Schiller says.

"There's a whole film on racism in the gay community. There's a whole film on the relationship of gay men to lesbians, and on homosexuals who married heterosexuals..."

Weiss is getting a chance to allay some of these frustrations by writing a book based on the wealth of materials unearthed for, but ultimately not included, in the film. She is also writing a book called *Vampires and Violets*, on lesbians and cinema, to be published by Naiad Press.

Another big effort in the works, is a historical documentary by Weiss, Schiller, and jazz historian Rosetta Reitz, on the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, a racially integrated women's band that played at major black theaters across the country through the '40s.

One of Schiller's on-going projects, whenever she has extra money, is to shoot footage of family and friends. "It now adds up to hours of interviews and films—my own personal archive," she says. Somewhere down the line, after *Before Stonewall* and *Sweethearts*, she would like to work with that material. "I'm very interested in mothers and families," she says. "That's a film I'd love to do."

Cathy Cockrell is a free-lance writer living in N.Y.

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